

## Meet the Workers; Scagliola, Part II...

From David Hayles & Douglas Mack,  
*Hayles & Howe Ornamental Plasterwork & Scagliola:*  
A History of the Capitol's 'Scagliola'

Imagine yourself one of the Italian scagliola experts who came to Idaho during the finishing stages of the central section of the State Capitol – a little prior to 1912. The underpinnings of the 230 State Capitol columns are completed. Workmen have installed the 230 steel supports, surrounded by bricks and covered with a rough, heavy plaster undersized by at least 1/8 inch. It is time for the craftsmen to take over. Imagine for a moment that you are an Italian craftsman. Under the stealth of black curtains you have installed so no one can observe



your secret process, you set up a bench the height of the column and a little wider than the circumference of the column. You put a border around the edge of the bench to hold the plaster in place, place an oil cloth on the bench, and cover the oil cloth with a mesh of silk threads that have been coated in a wet black pigment. You use an abstract design in setting up your "cat's cradle" of silk threads, because you are trying to simulate the veins in the marble. The threads are attached to separate framing so you can lift them out all at once. You have mixed many pots of gypsum plaster. You start with white, and mix gradations of darker gray with a black pot as the darkest plaster. Next the fun part; you throw globs of plaster from each pot onto your bench and on top of the mesh of silk threads. Your goal is to create the mottled appearance of genuine marble. After splashing, flicking, brushing and flinging globs of plaster, you scrape the surface to smooth it and repeat the process until you have 1/8 inch of plaster – according to **David Hayles**, pictured above on the right, in some parts of the scagliola it is only 1/16 of an inch thick. Once your oil cloth is completely covered, you smooth it one more time, and while it is still wet, you lift the separate frame that has all the silk threads attached. By pulling all of the threads up at once through the wet plaster, the dark pigment stains the plaster and simulates the darker vein patterns of the marble. The picture on the left is a

scagliola column adjacent to genuine marble. Now you cover your scagliola with cheesecloth and sprinkle dry plaster on the surface to serve as a blotting paper to make the wet plaster slightly stiff. Quickly you trowel some wet plaster around the column and put wet plaster on back of your creation on the bench after removing the cheesecloth. Now you lift your slightly-stiff coating for the column and wrap it around the column. You trowel it, smooth it, and in about one hour, peel off the oil cloth and see if your faux marble simulates real marble. But then, you are not done yet. There is more.

**Next week:** The history of Italian craftsmen finishing off the scagliola.

**The Scaffolding is Gone** You have noticed that there is no more scaffolding on the State Capitol. It was quite a process to watch the workmen remove it. According to **Joe Rutledge**, by Wednesday morning the final concrete should be poured on the east stairs; next watch for the ornamental hand rails which will replicate the originals, although they will meet current code requirements. Some shrubbery may be removed next week so workmen can inspect more of the granite and see where it needs to be patched or replaced.



**Please note:** The intent of **renewal news** is to provide readers the most current and complete information as possible regarding construction activities during the Capitol Restoration project. However, construction schedules are always subject to change, based upon weather conditions, transport and acquisition of support equipment and personnel, or other unforeseen circumstances. Inquiries, comments on the Restoration effort can be sent to **Diane Blume** at: [dblume@adm.state.id.us](mailto:dblume@adm.state.id.us) See **renewal news** online at: <http://www.idahocapitolcommission.org/whatsnew.html> If you have **questions about renewal news**, contact Carole Schroeder at 332-1802 or [cschroed@adm.state.id.us](mailto:cschroed@adm.state.id.us)